Empires and Identities: A Framework for Historical Analysis

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Introduction

We have several more classes left in this lecture series. And in these classes, what I am going to do is show you a framework for understanding how empires rise and fall. I am going to show you patterns that repeat throughout history. And I am going to give you tools to analyze geopolitical developments using historical models. Now before we begin I need to be very clear about what this is and what it is not. This is a class on intellectual speculation on theoretical frameworks on asking does this model explain historical patterns better than other models. This is not a class where I am telling you this is the truth. We are trying to figure out theories. We are trying to play with ideas. There is no absolute truth here. So take everything I say with a grain of salt. Doubt whatever I say. This class is really meant to be a platform or jumping board for you to undertake your own intellectual journey. This is about learning how to think, not what to think.

So there are three components to this framework which I call predictive history. And I want you to understand these three tools because we are going to use them throughout our analysis. The first tool is understanding historical patterns. When you look at an event in history, you ask yourself, does this fit into a larger pattern or model? If it does, it is probably following predictable dynamics. If it does not, then there is something unusual happening that requires explanation. The second tool is game theory. And the idea of game theory is to understand that all historical actors are motivated by their interests or world view. So when you are looking at different historical actors, you try to figure out what their best strategy is given their constraints and goals. What are they trying to achieve and what moves make sense from their perspective. The third tool is the idea of religious or ideological eschatology. What this means is that all cultures, all movements have a certain world view, a certain vision of how history should develop. You can often find this worldview within their sacred texts or founding documents. For example, the Bible or the Quran or the Communist Manifesto or the American Constitution. And these texts will give you insight into how they perceive history, but also how they want history to eventually develop. So you can understand the strategies moving forward based on their stated goals and beliefs. So we will look at these three tools and we will adapt them for our historical understanding. Keep these in mind as we move forward.

Now let me give you three patterns that appear repeatedly in geopolitical history. These are not moral claims. These are observations about how power actually functions. The first pattern is this and this is really important. Competition within states often matters more than competition between states. What drives conflict is that domestically you have different competing factions and they are all competing for power and resources. You have too many elites, too few elite positions, and so they are competing against each other. And this drives internal conflict. This is called elite overproduction. When you have more people trained and positioned to be leaders than there are leadership positions available, you get instability. The second pattern is that elites have shifting loyalties.

Think of complex political dramas. Everyone wants to be on top and they will form alliances and break alliances based on changing circumstances. Elites do not necessarily have permanent loyalties except to their own interests and advancement. Politics is strategic. The third pattern is that war can be a mechanism to manage internal pressures. Sometimes internal conflict becomes so intense that starting an external war becomes a way to redirect energies to eliminate rivals to create unity through external threat. This is the idea of strategic conflict. We will see these patterns throughout human history across different cultures and time periods. Keep these three ideas in mind as we discuss world history.

Chapter 1

Ancient Patterns: China and Mesopotamia

Let me give you an example to understand these dynamics. Think of the Warring States period in ancient China before the emergence of the first unified empire, the Qin dynasty. As you can see from historical maps, China was divided into different warring states that were all powerful. And at this time in history, the Qin state was actually the poorest, most isolated, and least culturally advanced. States like Chu and Zhao were more powerful and you could argue that eventually one of them would emerge to unite China but they did not. It was Qin, the isolated marginalized state that came to conquer everything. So the question is why did this happen? And if we use our three principles we can understand these different states were not really competing to destroy each other. The elites within these states were competing against each other for status. So the way they managed this was to use warfare in a regulated way to maintain equilibrium to create opportunities for glory without actually threatening the system.

This pattern is also true for ancient Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia is important because this is the cradle of civilization. This is where the first city-states emerged. This is where writing developed. This was for the longest time the wealthiest part of the world. The pattern in Mesopotamia is that the first city state was Uruk and then they developed colonies throughout the Tigris and Euphrates region and then these colonies would have conflicts with each other but they were all connected through trade and intermarriage and the elites created highly ritualized forms of warfare. One important rule was that you do not destroy each other's temples. In their religious system, the god lived in the temple. So you do not attack temples. But all the wealth, all the gold was stored in temples. So you are not allowed to take each other's most valuable resources. That is strategically inefficient. For the longest time, this was the equilibrium. Then what happened is a figure emerged named Lugalzagesi. And you can think of him as lower nobility. So what we see in history is that within societies there is conflict between upper nobility who control things and lower nobility who want more power. This happens in many periods in Rome. Julius Caesar was from a less prominent family and he challenged the dominant families called the optimates. So Lugalzagesi was from a secondary city called Umma and he decided these rules are limiting. I want to actually conquer and dominate. So he started breaking the conventions. He started seizing temple wealth and suddenly he had resources to build real power. But by doing that the other city states recognized him as a threat. So they invited mercenaries from a place called Akkad to help them. And this led to the first regional empire called the Akkadian Empire founded by Sargon of Akkad.

So the Akkadian Empire stretched throughout the fertile crescent. It conquered Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, extended to Anatolia, and captured much of the Levant. And this area, the Levant, is historically one of the most strategic locations in the world. Why? Because it gives you access to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia. Historically, three of the wealthiest regions in the world. So, whoever controls the Levant is able to threaten or trade with all three major centers of power and wealth. For most of early history, the Levant was an Egyptian sphere of influence. But after the Bronze Age collapsed around 1,200 B.C.E., Egypt could not project power as effectively in the Levant. And so different empires competed for control of the Levant in order to secure their position relative to Egypt. Jerusalem sits at a crucial junction in this region and throughout history people have considered it strategically central both for religious reasons but also mainly for geopolitical and trade reasons. Control of this area meant control of trade routes between three major centers.

Now the other thing to remember about this region is that it is highly competitive because Mesopotamia is hard to defend. Mesopotamia is very wealthy, but as you can see from geography, there are mountain tribes and border regions that can always threaten Mesopotamian centers. So this is a pattern throughout history where whoever establishes power in Mesopotamia is constantly being threatened from the periphery. That is why these empires change frequently. You had the Babylonian Empire which gave us Hammurabi and his famous law code. Then you had the Assyrian Empire which was famous for brutal methods of control. If you rebelled against them they would use extreme violence as deterrence. They were notorious for this approach. Then you had the neo-Babylonian empire. So you have these empires that constantly shift power.

Chapter 2

The Persian Empire and Innovations in Rule

History changes significantly when a figure emerges called Cyrus the Great. Cyrus the Great is the founder of the Persian Achaemenid empire. Zoroastrianism was really the first major monotheistic or quasi-monotheistic religion because it provides a clear ethical framework of how the world works. Zoroastrianism is powerful because it encourages everyone to pursue truth and righteousness. For most people, what this meant in practice was do not lie. And this is actually a really useful cultural trait if you are trying to run an empire because when you run an empire, you need soldiers, generals, administrators. And if people are trained to be honest and moral, you can expand more efficiently because information flows accurately. And that is what Cyrus the Great did. Cyrus is known historically for his policies of tolerance and integration. So when he conquered a place, he would often identify capable people, maybe even the existing ruler and make them advisors or governors in his system. He was known for religious tolerance for respecting local customs. And what happened is that the Babylonian Empire basically surrendered to him without major conflict. Why? Because of internal divisions. You have factions competing within Babylon and some of them saw Cyrus as a better option than their current rulers. So they facilitated his takeover and that is how Cyrus was able to build the first truly vast empire.

Let me explain different methods of ruling empires. The traditional methods are you control trade routes and access. People have to pay you tolls to use your roads and ports. You can also use fear and conquest. That is what the Assyrians were known for. You can take hostages from conquered peoples, especially the children of rulers. You can use religion to legitimize your rule. But what the Persians did really well that allowed their empire to be so large and so well-managed were several innovations. First, effective administration. When you have a culture like Zoroastrianism that emphasizes truth-telling, you get more accurate information flow. Bureaucrats report real facts to the emperor and that allows better decision-making. You are not operating on false information or flattery. Second, elite cultivation and meritocracy. If you have an effective administration that allows talented people from conquered regions to rise, then local elites focus their energies on joining your system rather than rebelling against it. You co-opt potential opposition by offering them opportunities. Third, communication networks. The Persians created extensive road systems and the first large-scale postal network. If you wanted to send information from Egypt to Mesopotamia, there were royal roads where messengers on horses could stop at stations for rest and fresh horses and then continue. This way

you could move information across the empire relatively quickly. And fourth, divide and rule. This is probably the most effective imperial strategy. What they did was create multiple power centers within a region. You had satraps who were provincial governors, but you also had separate bureaucrats and royal inspectors. These were different factions within a territory reporting through different chains. This prevented any one person from accumulating too much regional power and potentially rebelling.

Chapter 3

Jewish Identity in the Persian Period

Now let us talk about the development of Jewish identity in the Persian period. We need to understand this historically not theologically. Remember that we read the Hebrew Bible and the Bible emerged over centuries as various texts were compiled. After the bronze age collapse, there was a period when small kingdoms could exist in the Levant because the major powers Egypt, Anatolia, Mesopotamia were weakened or preoccupied. During this period, a kingdom emerged in the Levant. According to biblical sources, this was the United Monarchy under David and Solomon. After Solomon's death, the kingdom divided into a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah, centered on Jerusalem. Now, at this time in history, the Israelites were caught between major powers. The Anatolians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians all had interests in this region because it is strategically vital. And so maintaining independence was very difficult. Eventually, the northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria. The southern kingdom Judah tried to maintain independence by playing different powers against each other. But this strategy ultimately failed. The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar took many people from Jerusalem to Babylon as hostages and administrators. This is called the Babylonian exile. The elites, the priests, the scribes were relocated to Babylon where they became part of the Babylonian administrative system. But the region kept rebelling because of its strategic importance. Eventually around 587 to 586 B.C.E. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple, because they could not maintain control through other means. This is a crucial moment. The temple was the center of religious practice. When the temple was destroyed, the old system of worship ended. The people were scattered. The political entity ceased to exist. Then in 539 B.C.E. Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon. And according to biblical and historical sources, Cyrus issued an edict allowing exiled peoples to return to their homelands. This is called the Edict of Cyrus and it is celebrated in biblical texts. Now, what is interesting historically is why would Cyrus do this? The people who had been in Babylon for two or three generations had adapted. They had lives there. They had learned Aramaic. They had become scribes and merchants and administrators. They had built a community. So why would a Persian emperor encourage them to return to a distant province?

The biblical explanation is that Cyrus was inspired by God to do this. He recognized the God of Israel and wanted to restore the temple. That is the religious interpretation. Another explanation is that Cyrus wanted to demonstrate that the Persian Empire was religiously tolerant. You can practice your religion. You can rebuild your sacred sites.

This was different from Assyrian or Babylonian policies. This created loyalty and reduced resistance. Another possibility is that Cyrus saw himself as a righteous king who corrected injustices. The Babylonian exile was seen as harsh. So he reversed it. This enhanced his reputation. Another factor is that many of these exiles had become valuable administrators. They were literate, educated, trained in complex systems. Cyrus may have wanted to utilize their skills in governing the Levant region, but from a strategic perspective, the most compelling explanation involves imperial logic. The Levant is crucial for access to Egypt. Egypt was immensely wealthy. Whoever controlled the Levant could threaten or trade with Egypt. So, you need a reliable presence in the Levant. One strategy is to establish a community there that depends on imperial support for survival. A group that owes its existence to the empire and therefore remains loyal. A group that might face resistance from surrounding populations and therefore needs imperial backing. This is called a divide and rule strategy. You create a client population that has conflicts with surrounding groups. Both your clients and their neighbors then need you to mediate. This gives you control. So according to biblical sources, some of the exiles returned to Jerusalem. These returnees saw themselves as maintaining the authentic tradition because they had preserved texts and practices during the exile. But when they arrived, they found that people had been living in the region all along. These local populations considered themselves Israelites too. They had maintained their identity in their own way, adapted to circumstances, married into neighboring groups, practiced religion with local variations. So you had conflict between returnees who claimed authenticity and locals who claimed continuity. This is described in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Now these two books are really important for understanding the development of Jewish identity in the second temple period. Ezra and Nehemiah show the process of reconstruction and the conflicts involved. Let me read some passages so you can see the dynamics. This is from the beginning of Ezra in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished. The Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict. So the biblical text frames this as divine intervention, God inspired Cyrus. But we can also see this as standard imperial policy. Thus says King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Cyrus is portrayed as recognizing the God of Israel and authorizing reconstruction. Whether this represents Cyrus's actual religious beliefs or is a formula he used with different peoples, we do not know. Empires often worked by acknowledging local gods and presenting themselves as restoring proper worship. Any of those among you who are of his people may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. and let all survivors be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals besides free will offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem. So Cyrus is described as not only permitting return but financing reconstruction. This creates loyalty and dependence. The returnees owe their opportunity to Persian authorization.

Now when they try to rebuild the temple, conflicts emerge from Ezra. We read about the foundation ceremony. When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets. And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised

the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house. though many shouted aloud for joy. So there is both joy and mourning. Joy that the temple is being rebuilt. Mourning that it is not as grand as Solomon's temple. This creates powerful emotional investment in the project. But then conflict emerges. Local populations offer to help. When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, they approached and said, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God, as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esarhaddon of Assyria, who brought us here." So, local groups say, "We are part of this tradition, too. We worship the same God. We should participate in rebuilding." But the response is rejection. But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, "You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God, but we alone will build to the Lord the God of Israel as King Cyrus of Persia commanded us." This is significant. The returnees claim exclusive authority based on Persian authorization. They define themselves as the true Israelites and exclude others who had remained in the land. This creates lasting division and conflict. From a strategic perspective, this division serves imperial interests because both groups need Persian mediation.

Later in the text, Ezra addresses the community. He is both a priest and a scribe, educated in Babylonian administrative systems. Tradition attributes to him a major role in compiling and editing biblical texts. Ezra gives a speech reflecting on why the exile happened and what must be done now. Oh my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors to this day, we have been deep in guilt. So the exile is interpreted as divine punishment for disobedience to God. This theological framework shapes identity going forward. But now, for a brief moment, favor has been shown by the Lord our God, who has left us a remnant and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery. For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia to give us new life to set up the house of our God to repair its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem. So Ezra frames Persian authorization as divine mercy. They have a second chance. But this chance depends on maintaining certain practices. The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands with their abominations. Therefore, do not give your daughters to their sons. Neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever. This is a key passage. Ezra is establishing strict boundaries. The land is described as polluted by mixing. To maintain divine favor, they must remain separate. This means not intermarrying with surrounding populations. This creates a distinct identity based on endogamy and exclusive religious practice.

The book of Nehemiah describes another figure sent from Persia to govern the province. Nehemiah had been a high official in the Persian court. The text describes him asking permission to go to Jerusalem. I was cupbearer to the king. In the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. So, the king said to me, "Why is your face sad since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart. Nehemiah explains his distress about Jerusalem's condition and asks permission to go re-

build it. The king grants this and provides resources. Now, from a historical perspective, this presents Nehemiah as personally motivated. But governors do not just decide to go administer distant provinces. They are appointed as part of imperial strategy. The text may be framing imperial policy as personal requests to make it seem like local initiative rather than imperial imposition. When Nehemiah arrives, he works on both physical and social reconstruction. He organizes building projects, particularly walls. Walls are important both for defense and for defining boundaries, creating a distinct zone. Nehemiah also addresses internal problems. There is economic inequality and exploitation within the community. Now, there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain." And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. We are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished. We are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others." So there is severe economic distress. People are losing their land, going into debt, slavery. This threatens community cohesion. Nehemiah responds by demanding that the wealthy cancel debts and return property. I was very angry when I heard their outcry. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are all taking interest from your own people. The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses. This is significant. The prohibition on charging interest within the community becomes a defining practice. This creates internal solidarity and mutual support while maintaining boundaries with outsiders. This practice continues through history where Jewish communities develop internal systems of interest-free lending and mutual aid. This provides economic resilience and maintains community bonds.

The final key step is establishing shared historical memory through public reading of texts. When the seventh month came, all the people gathered together into the square. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses. Accordingly, Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could hear with understanding. He read from it from early morning until midday. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. This is crucial. Ezra is establishing the Torah as the central text of identity. Regardless of where you are, regardless of circumstances, your historical memory, your identity, your practices are encoded in this text. This makes the community extremely resilient because identity is portable. You do not need a kingdom or even a temple. As long as you have the text and people who can read it, you can maintain identity across time and geography. This is one reason Jewish communities survived when other ancient peoples were assimilated and disappeared. The emphasis on literacy and textual tradition meant identity could persist even through dispersion.

Nehemiah also enforces strict social boundaries particularly around marriage. In those days I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of the children spoke the language of Ashdod and could not speak the language of Judah. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair, and I made them take an oath in the name of God saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons." This is harsh enforcement of endogamy. The concern is that intermarriage leads to cultural and

religious assimilation. Children are learning other languages following other practices. Nehemiah invokes Solomon as a warning. Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations, there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God. Yet foreign women made even him to sin. So even the greatest king was led astray by foreign influence. Therefore, strict separation is necessary. From a historical perspective, this creates a distinct community with clear boundaries. This serves imperial purposes by maintaining a loyal population that cannot easily merge with surrounding groups.

Now, I want you to see a pattern here. What is described in Ezra and Nehemiah is a process of creating a distinct identity under imperial sponsorship. An empire authorizes a group to establish itself in a strategic location. That group is given resources and support. They establish practices that separate them from surrounding populations. They develop internal solidarity through shared texts and mutual aid. They maintain loyalty to the empire because they depend on imperial backing against local resistance. This is not unique to this situation. You can see similar patterns throughout history where empires use client populations to control strategic regions.

Now let me show you a striking parallel. In 1917, the British government issued what is called the Balfour Declaration. This was a letter from British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a prominent British Jewish figure. The letter states, "His majesty's government view would favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object." Notice the structure. A major empire authorizes a group to establish themselves in a strategic region. The empire provides support. This creates facts on the ground that serve imperial interests. Why did Britain do this? Multiple factors, but strategic control was paramount. Britain wanted to control the Middle East. The region was crucial for access to India, for oil, for trade routes. By supporting a Zionist project, Britain could justify continued presence in Palestine after World War I when the Ottoman Empire collapsed. This is similar to Persian policy. Use a client population to maintain control of a strategic corridor. The population depends on your backing and therefore remains aligned with your interests. Now the Balfour declaration led to the British mandate over Palestine and eventually to the creation of Israel in 1948. The partition of Palestine and the subsequent conflicts have to be understood in this imperial context. I am not making moral judgments about whether Israel should exist or about competing claims. I am analyzing the structural logic of how imperial powers use population movements and identity politics to maintain control.

So here is why reading biblical texts carefully is important for understanding geopolitics. These texts are not just religious. They are also historical records of how empires operated and how identities were constructed. When you read Ezra and Nehemiah, you see the process of how Persian policy worked. When you read these texts and then look at modern situations, you can see similar patterns. Imperial powers throughout history have used religious or ethnic communities as strategic assets. They frame this in idealistic terms. Divine mandate, civilizing mission, national self-determination. But underneath there is strategic logic about controlling trade routes, resources, and rival powers. This does not mean the communities are just puppets. Communities have agency. They develop their own goals and practices. But they operate within structures shaped by imperial competition.

So let me apply our three tools of analysis here. Remember we talked about historical patterns, game theory, and eschatology. First, historical patterns. We see a recurring

pattern throughout history. Empires need to control strategic regions, but direct control is expensive and generates resistance. So they use client populations who depend on imperial backing and therefore remain loyal. This creates divide and rule situations where multiple groups compete and all need the empire to mediate. This pattern appears in Persian policy, in the Levant, in Roman policy, with various client kingdoms, in British colonial policy across Africa, Asia and the Middle East, in American cold war policy supporting various regimes. The specifics change, but the structural logic remains. Second game theory. From a strategic perspective, if you are an empire controlling the Levant, what is your best move? You need a presence there, but you cannot afford to occupy it with your own forces constantly. So, you establish a community that is loyal to you and in tension with neighbors. Both your clients and their rivals then need you. You become indispensable. From the perspective of the client community, your best strategy is to maintain imperial backing while gradually building your own strength. You need the empire initially, but you want eventual autonomy. So you present yourself as loyal while positioning for independence. Third, eschatology. If you read biblical texts carefully, you see a vision of history. The texts describe exile as punishment for disobedience and return as divine mercy contingent on maintaining purity and following law. This creates a framework where the community must maintain boundaries to preserve divine favor. This vision shapes behavior. If you believe your survival depends on maintaining certain practices, then you will enforce those practices even when it is costly. This makes the community resilient but also creates ongoing tensions with neighbors.

Chapter 4

Contemporary Applications and Limitations

Now, how does this framework help us understand contemporary situations? Let us apply it carefully. Modern Israel was established in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. The Holocaust was a catastrophic trauma that created urgent need for Jewish refuge. At the same time, the region was strategically vital for postwar powers. Britain and then America had interest in controlling Middle Eastern oil and trade routes and countering Soviet influence. Supporting Israel served these interests while also addressing humanitarian concerns about Jewish refugees. But this created inherent tensions. The local Palestinian population had been living in the region for centuries. They did not understand why they should bear the cost of European anti-semitism. From their perspective, this was colonial displacement. So you have a situation where two populations claim the same territory both with legitimate historical and emotional connections and major powers have interests in how this resolves. From a strategic perspective, the ongoing conflict serves certain imperial interests. As long as there is tension, all parties need external mediation. America becomes indispensable. Arm sales continue. Military bases are justified. Regional unity against external powers is prevented. But this also means the conflict persists. Resolution would reduce dependence on external powers. So there are structural incentives against resolution. Now I am not saying anyone wants conflict for its own sake. But the incentive structures make resolution difficult and communities on all sides suffer as a result.

Now, let me talk about how we might analyze possible future developments using our framework. I am not making definite predictions. I am exploring possibilities based on historical patterns. First, if you look at how communities use religious text to guide action, you can identify what developments certain groups might pursue. Some religious Zionists believe in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. This is based on biblical texts and messianic expectations. The challenge is the Temple Mount is currently home to the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, which are sacred sites in Islam. Any attempt to alter this would create enormous conflict, potentially regional or global in scale. Most Israeli governments have maintained the status quo because changing it would be so destabilizing. But there are groups that advocate for change and their influence fluctuates with political conditions. From a framework perspective, if you want to understand what might happen, you look at which groups have influence, what constraints they face, what opportunities might emerge. You do not predict with certainty, but you identify possibilities. Second, you can look at trends in religious practice and political power. In

Israel, there has been a demographic shift. Religious communities tend to have higher birth rates. Over time, this changes the political balance. Policies that were once fringe become mainstream. This might lead to issues becoming more explicitly theocratic, meaning religious law plays a larger role in governance. This would create tensions with secular Israelis and with international partners who expect democratic norms. Third, you can look at regional dynamics. If Israel feels increasingly isolated internationally, it might pursue more independent policy even at cost of conflict. If it feels secure with strong allies, it might take risks for peace. The strategic calculations shift based on changing circumstances.

Now, let us address the relationship between Israel and the United States. This is often framed as unshakable alliance based on shared values. But from a strategic perspective, all alliances are contingent on interests. America supports Israel for several reasons. historical commitment following the Holocaust. Domestic political factors including both Jewish-American communities and Christian Zionist communities, strategic interest in having a stable military partner in the Middle East, cultural and ideological affinity between democracies. But American interests are complex. America also has relationships with Arab states, oil producers, military partners. So, American policy tries to balance supporting Israel while maintaining other regional relationships. From Israel's perspective, relying on American support is both advantageous and constraining. America provides military aid, diplomatic backing, security guarantees. But America also sometimes pressures Israel on settlements, peace processes, international law. Some in Israel argue for reducing dependence on American support to gain more freedom of action, but this would require either finding alternative partners or accepting more isolation. Both have costs. From a game theory perspective, you can model this as shifting incentives. As long as both parties see the alliance as beneficial, it continues. If costs rise or alternatives emerge, calculations change.

Now, I want to emphasize something important. These situations are incredibly complex. Multiple groups have legitimate concerns and grievances. There are no simple solutions and analysis does not imply endorsement of any particular outcome. When we analyze imperial strategies or client relationships, we are not saying those are the only factors. Human agency matters. Moral considerations matter. Unexpected events matter, but structural factors also matter and often get overlooked. Palestinians have experienced displacement, violence, denial of rights. Their suffering is real and demands recognition. Israeli Jews have experienced persecution, genocide, existential threats. Their security concerns are real and demand recognition. Both narratives are valid. Both populations deserve safety, dignity, self-determination. The challenge is that their needs seem to conflict given limited territory and deep historical grievances. Resolution requires acknowledging complexity. It requires both populations feeling secure enough to compromise. It requires international actors supporting peace rather than benefiting from conflict. None of this is easy.

So why do we study these historical patterns and frameworks? Not to make definitive predictions, but to understand possibilities and constraints. To see beyond surface narratives to structural dynamics, to recognize how similar situations have developed historically. This helps us think more clearly about complex situations. It helps us see past propaganda from all sides. It helps us understand why conflicts persist and what might enable resolution. It also helps us see how we as individuals and communities are positioned within larger systems. We are not just passive recipients of history. We can make choices, but our choices occur within context shaped by geography, resources,

power, relationships, ideas. Understanding these contexts does not determine what we should do. Ethics and values guide that, but it helps us understand what is actually possible and what strategies might work.

Let me review how we have used our three analytical tools in this analysis. Historical patterns. We identified the recurring pattern of empires using client populations to control strategic regions. We saw this in Persian policy, Hellenistic policy, Roman policy, British policy, American policy. The specifics differ, but the logic remains. We also identified the pattern of elite competition driving conflict. Within the Persian Empire, within Babylonian and other Mesopotamian states, within Judah itself, competition among elites shaped outcomes. Understanding this helps explain why certain policies emerged. Game theory, we analyze strategic calculations from multiple perspectives. From the empire perspective, what is the most efficient way to control a region? From the client population perspective, how do you survive and advance? From rival population perspective, how do you respond? We looked at how cost, benefits, and alternatives shape decisions. We saw that rational actors make different choices under different conditions. This helps us understand why alliances form and break, why conflicts escalate and deescalate. Eschatology, we examine how religious texts and visions of history shape behavior. The biblical vision of exile and return, the emphasis on purity and covenant, the promise of eventual restoration. These are not just beliefs. They are frameworks that guide action. When communities believe they are fulfilling divine purpose, they are willing to accept cost. When they believe their survival depends on certain practices, they maintain those practices. Understanding these frameworks helps predict which possibilities communities might pursue.

Now, let me be clear about limitations. This framework does not explain everything. Human behavior is not fully predictable. Unexpected individuals and events matter. Moral considerations matter independent of strategic calculations. Also, this framework is one perspective among many. Other scholars analyze these situations differently. Some emphasize nationalism. Others emphasize economics. Others emphasize ideology. Still others emphasize individual agency and contingency. No single framework captures full complexity. We use frameworks to organize thinking to identify patterns to generate insights. But we should hold them lightly and revise them based on new evidence and perspectives. Also, my position as an analyst shapes what I see. I am trained in certain disciplines. I have certain cultural perspectives. I have certain interests. Other observers with different backgrounds see different things. So engage with this framework critically. Test it against evidence. Compare it to alternatives. Develop your own synthesis. That is what intellectual work is about.

Conclusion

We have looked at ancient texts not just as religious documents, but as historical sources that reveal how political systems operated. We have seen how identity is constructed through practices like endogamy, literacy, religious observance, communal memory. We have examined how empires use divide and rule strategies to control strategic regions. We have traced parallels across different historical periods, showing that while specifics change, structural logics persist. We have discussed how understanding these patterns helps us analyze contemporary situations not to predict outcomes definitively, but to understand possibilities and constraints. But I want to emphasize again this is one framework among many. It highlights certain factors and dynamics. Other frameworks highlight different factors. Truth is complex and requires multiple perspectives. Also analysis has limits. We can study patterns and structures but we cannot reduce human experience to formulas. People are not just game pieces moved by strategic logic. They have hopes, fears, dreams, values. They make choices that defy prediction. History is not deterministic. Yes, there are patterns and constraints, but there are also contingencies, surprises, transformations, new ideas emerge. Unexpected alliances form. Systems that seem stable collapse. Conflicts that seem intractable resolve. So use this framework to sharpen thinking but do not let it limit imagination. Understand how things work but do not accept that they must stay that way. Analyze strategic calculations but do not abandon ethical commitments. The goal of education is not to make you cynical. It is to make you clear-sighted to help you see past propaganda and simplistic narratives. to give you tools for understanding complexity and ultimately to empower you to make better choices individually and collectively. That is what we are doing in this class. Not telling you what to think, but teaching you how to think. Not providing answers, but developing questions. Not settling debates, but enabling you to engage debates more effectively. So, take these ideas, think about them, challenge them, test them against evidence and experience. develop your own frameworks, your own synthesis, your own positions. That is the intellectual journey and it is one each of us must make for ourselves.